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ABSTRACT

While America's two-year colleges are diverse in function, mission, clientele, and organizational structure, they share a common identity in their commitment to a developmental philosophy. A rarely used, but nonetheless tenable and cost-saving path to development involves exploring strategies which simultaneously contribute to faculty, student, and institutional growth. An example of such an integrative strategy is the extended orientation or freshman seminar. Such courses tend to bring together a small group of freshmen under the tutelage of a supportive instructor. Research into such courses shows them to be highly productive in enhancing freshman retention and academic performance. While a prime characteristic of freshman seminars is the diversity in their content and organizational structures, one of the most widely recognized configurations calls for thematic content focused on student development accompanied by an extensive and required faculty training component. Providing such training not only helps faculty prepare for the course, but it also can orient new or part-time faculty to campus facilities, services, and personnel. From an organizational standpoint, there is general agreement that a diagnostic dimension is an essential component of any organizational development strategy. Overall, freshman seminar courses are not as extensively utilized at two-year colleges as they are at four-year colleges. A study of freshman seminars indicated that the content and focus of the two-year college freshman seminar differed significantly from similar courses at four-year colleges; specifically, two-year colleges that utilized the courses did more to ameliorate academic deficiencies than to develop the personal/social aspects of students. (JMC)

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THE FRESHMAN SEMINAR AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A TOOL FOR INTEGRATING STUDENT, FACULTY AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Running Head: THE FRESHMAN SEMINAR

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Abstract

This article describes how student, faculty, and institutional development philosophies at the community college are currently characterized by the difficulties in finding tools for actualizing these philosophies. Specific suggestions are presented for utilizing the freshman seminar at the community college as such a tool for enhancing student, faculty and institutional development.

The Freshman Seminar at the Community College: A Tool for Integrating Student, Faculty, and Institutional Development

While America's more than 1200 two-year colleges are diverse in function, mission, clientele, and organizational structure, they nevertheless share a common identity in their commitment to a developmental philosophy.

This developmental theme was an integral part of the philosophy of the junior college founders who were intent upon fashioning an institution which could address the innate potential of individuals (Goodwin, 1973; Koos, 1925). The subsequent mission expansion of two-year colleges between 1930 and 1960, extended the developmental emphasis and led to the reaffirmation of holistic approaches to address the needs of an increasingly diverse clientele. During the 1960s the developmental focus became more pronounced with the evolution of student development theories and practices and their apparent compatibility with the functions at community-junior colleges (O'Banion & Thurston, 1972). The advocates of the rapidly emerging community colleges of the 60s and 70s advanced even broader developmental roles--centering upon developing the community, society, and even the economy through linkages to business and industry (Harlacher, 1969; Gollattscheck, Harlacher, Roberts, & Wygal 1976; Gleazer, 1980).

As two-year colleges became more varied, so too did the educational preparation of their faculty and staff. Consequently, both the junior and the community college areas have been marked by intense concerns for faculty and staff development. The scope of faculty and staff development ranged from defining and developing vocational education faculty in the 1930s to preparing administrators and instructors for the burgeoning numbers of new two-year colleges in the 1960s

(Moore, 1971; Cohen, 1968; Yarrington, 1974). More recently the developmental emphasis has centered on rejuvenating aging faculty, enhancing the quality of the rapidly growing numbers of part-time instructors, helping faculty and staff adapt to new technologies in the workplace, and assisting faculty to understand a more diverse student clientele (Harnish & Creamer, 1986; Deegan Tillery, & Associates 1985; Boyar & MacKenzie, 1987; Smith, 1980; 1989; Cross, 1983).

Soon the developmental emphasis became so pervasive that it eventually included the institution itself. Institutional development reached greater prominence as community colleges began to encounter periods of re-evaluation, renewal, and reorganization brought on by increasing external control, fiscal uncertainties, and threats from external competitors, and internal detractors (Hammons, 1982; Deegan et al., 1985; O'Banion, 1989; Cross, 1981). In the face of these and other major concerns community college leaders have been calling for developmental changes to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization, to improve the human relationship aspects within the college, and to establish a more systematic problem-solving and self-renewal process (Deegan et al., 1985; O'Banion, 1989).

While student, faculty, and institutional development have been common themes at two-year colleges, the means for actualizing development in these areas has remained elusive. For example, putting the numerous student development theories into practice has been a persistence problem for student affairs administrators (Knelfelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). In addition, faculty development practices have been difficult to implement in the face of fiscal constraints and an increasingly inaccessible part-time staff (Smith, 1989). And, while organizational development is ripe in theory, its success is hampered both by

a lack of precise triggering mechanisms to carry out development and by a paucity of information gathering sources (Bennis, 1969: Scharff, 1982).

The importance of development and the complex task of putting it into practice led to a proliferation of specialized personnel within student, faculty, and institutional areas. Specialization also brought a rapid expansion of separate developmental programs and offices each with independent agendas and largely segregated approaches. Admittedly, there have been some authorities who have seen the apparent parallels in development along student, faculty, and institutional lines and some even have designed a process or a project for integrating staff and institutional development (Houston, 1980; Dillion-Peterson, 1981; Claxton, 1977; Kozoll, 1978; & Moore, 1979). Others have suggested a link between student and institutional development (Whitcomb & Beck, 1980).

Clearly, however, programs and mechanisms to unify faculty, student, and institutional development are rare while duplication of effort is common. This lack of integration is most puzzling not only because of the obvious common developmental themes, but also in light of the fiscal constraints confronting institutions today. Instead, a much more tenable and cost--saving path to development would involve exploring strategies which simultaneously contribute to faculty, student, and institutional growth. A prime example of such an integrative strategy is the utilization of a freshman extended orientation/seminar course.

While the design and content of such courses vary, the essence of their character lies in bringing together small groups of freshman under the tutelage of supportive instructors. For these courses, the rationale centers upon providing a venue for freshman to interact more frequently with faculty and to more readily establish a supportive peer group to buffer initial college adjustment difficulties.

The Freshman Seminar and Student Development

Over two-thirds of two-year colleges employ some type of freshman seminar/orientation course for first year students (Rice & Devore, 1991). The positive effects of such courses on students-especially those from two-year colleges-are well documented (Cuesco, 1991; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, & 1989). Research is most succinct in showing the courses to be highly productive in enhancing freshman retention and academic performance (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Rivers, 1985; Donnangelo & Santa-Rita, 1982; Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989; Hopkins & Hahn, 1985). Additional evidence points to the beneficial effects of the courses on increasing student knowledge of the campus (Chapman & Reed, 1987); fostering student use of academic services (Lawson, 1983); encouraging faculty and student interaction (Russel & Siers 1984); increasing student involvement with extra-curricular activities (Astolf & McGillan 1989); and remediating poor academic skills (Woodward, 1982). The courses positively shape student attitudes toward the college and faculty (Lawson, 1983); and they enhance the level of student social integration as well as promote student and faculty interaction (Rice, 1990; Maisto & Tammi, 1991).

The Freshman Seminar and Faculty Development

A prime characteristic of freshman seminars is the tremendous diversity in their content and organizational structures (Gordon & Grites, 1984; Murphy, 1989). However, one of the most widely recognized configuration calls for a student development content theme accompanied by an extensive and required faculty training component (Gardner, 1986). Providing such training not only helps faculty to prepare for the course, but it also can orient new or part-time faculty to campus facilities, services, and personnel. Moreover, the training can include dispensing information to faculty about educational trends, student learning styles

and academic aptitudes, and important changes in academic policies and regulations. In addition, the training can be a source for introducing new instructional methods, technologies, and assessment strategies. Even more importantly, however, is the fact that formalized training for the freshman seminar can be an effective tool for establishing or maintaining a greater sense of community among a growing diverse and often unconnected faculty.

Faulty training represents only a part of the course's total faculty development potential. Its full educative power lies in the actual teaching of the course. Because freshman seminars can be fashioned to house many content approaches, they can energize community college instructors who are often saddled with restrictive, narrowed and relatively flat curriculum offerings. In addition, when the seminar is offered in small-group fashion, they increase student/faculty interaction and promote more positive student reactions towards faculty (Rice, 1990).

Other faculty development outcomes as a result of teaching the course are seen in a study of 183 faculty members who taught the freshman seminar course for the University of South Carolina system. In this study Whitcomb (1983) found that over 80 percent of the instructors believed that teaching the course significantly enhanced their knowledge of student needs and that instructors were more sensitive to student problems as a result of the training and subsequent course participation. In addition, Whitcomb reported that over 80 percent of the faculty believed that teaching the course was a major contributor to their professional rejuvenation. Finally, the report indicated that 93 percent of the 183 participants saw the freshman seminar course and its accompanying training component as a highly valuable faculty development program. Additional research studies have shown that instructors typically experience significant increases in job satisfaction as consequence of teaching freshman seminars and that they experience more positive

relations with students in their other classes after participating in the seminar (Warner & Geismann, 1989; D'Amico & Rosenbaum, 1983). Rouche and Baker (1983) contend that the ideal model for faculty development should be faculty experimentation with new courses and teaching methods. The positive research findings on the effects of teaching freshman seminars seems to substantiate its value for implementing a course which can give faculty the opportunity to experiment with innovative teaching ideas, methods, and techniques.

The Freshman Seminar and Institutional Development

According to Hammons (1982) organizational development focuses on "nurturing the ability of the organization to grow and develop and is initiated when problems in the organization are detected" (p. 10). Essentially, organizational development begins with a method for identifying and detecting problems. Wilensky (1967) called such information gathering, "organizational intelligence." Others refer to this type of information seeking as providing the organization with a scanning unit or radar system to clarify institutional goals and to set institutional agendas (Pfeffer & Salanick, 1978). Thus, despite conceptual difference in defining organizational development, there is general agreement that a diagnostic or fact finding dimension is an essential component of any organizational development strategy (French & Bell, 1978; Hammons, 1982; Blake & Mouton, 1970).

When the freshman seminar is extensively used it can be an excellent forum for collecting data on new student needs, aptitudes, attitudes, and expectations. It can also be a means for measuring student reactions to collegiate services as well the forms of instruction. In addition, it can be a wonderful source for the initial measurement of any value-added assessments.

Of course, fostering organizational development requires comprehensive strategies extending well beyond diagnostic and survey activities. Many advocate

that the key components for organizational development strategies involve interactive and training activities for personnel (French & Bell, 1978; Bennis, 1969; Blake & Mouton, 1970). Included in such strategies are experiences in team-and trust-building; intergroup and collaborative activities; and training situations which strengthen working relationships. All these suggestions are highly compatible with the essence of the freshman seminar and its accompanying faculty training program.

The Freshman Seminar at the Community College

Despite their apparent potential as a nexus for comprehensive development, freshman seminar courses are not as extensively utilized at two-year colleges as they are at four-year colleges. In a study conducted by the National Center for the Freshman Year Experience, two year colleges were found to be significantly less likely to require freshman seminars, or to extend the course throughout the term, or to employ a faculty development and training component for course instructors. Two-year colleges were more likely to have freshman seminar/extended orientation courses with enrollments of more than 40 students, and were less likely to offer the course as a general education graduation requirement (Rice & Devore, in press).

The nation-wide study also indicated that the content and focus of the two-year college freshman seminars significantly differed from similar courses at four-year colleges. Specifically, two-year colleges that utilized the courses did more to ameliorate academic deficiencies than to develop the personal/social aspects of students (Rice & Devore, in press). In addition, Rice & Devore found that at the two-year college, freshman seminars were less likely to emphasize group building activities, address values clarification areas, stress leadership training, provide human relationship training, or focus upon issues of sexism and consumer skills.

Hence, in its present form, the freshman seminar at most community colleges may not be broad based enough to strongly enhance student, faculty and institutional development.

Conclusion

Obviously, the freshman seminar should not be construed as a panacea for actualizing development at the two-year college. Nor is it suggested that the seminar ultimately usurp the need for developmental specialists at the college.

What the described broad based freshman seminar can do is affect positive change across a wide range of student development dimensions. It can provide an ideal forum for formalizing faculty development and a means for strengthening the instructional techniques and methods of faculty. The seminar can be a useful tool for rejuvenating and energizing faculty, and when accompanied by formal training sessions, can help renew a more experienced faculty and aid in faculty adjustment to changes in institutional policies and regulations. When the training is conducted in group sessions, it can act as an excellent means for fostering a stronger sense of community across instructional lines. Finally, the freshman seminar can serve as a valuable fact finding source for measuring student impressions about the college and a splendid method for building and maintaining cooperative relationships-factors essential for sound organizational development.

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